



SHE WALKS WITH PURPOSE

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Miss Kumeyaay Nation 2023~2024

By Jeanne Ferris

Harmony Sweetgrass, from the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, has good reason to wear the hand-beaded crown and sash as Miss Kumeyaay Nation 2023-2024 with pride.

On the summer solstice this year, at 21 years of age, she became the first in her tribal band to win in the pageant's 20-year history.

Denise Redfern, Ipai Kumeyaay, is also from Ms. Sweetgrass's clan, Paipa. As Miss Kumeyaay 2006-2007, Ms. Redfern serves on the Miss Kumeyaay Committee.

"Most of the committee members are former titleholders and a few elders," Ms. Redfern said. "Viejas hosts the pageant and obtains the grant for the two-day judging event. Judges are from the twelve bands of the Kumeyaay Nation."

If you've never attended a Native American gathering, do yourself a favor. Go. If just once. The pageantry of dancing for life and healing is rich in sounds, colors, textiles, heritage materials, and aromas. Even one's spiritual senses become enlightened with elevated intentions.

Miss Indian World is an annual pageant celebrating the culture, traditions and values of Indigenous women in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is attended by over 565 tribes in North America, 220 tribes travel from Canada.

The competition was first held in 1984 and has since become a significant event for Indigenous communities during the Gathering of the Nations.

This past April, Cynthia Bond, 21, an enrolled member of the Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians competed with 26 Indigenous women during the Gathering of Nations Powwow. It was live streamed on [Powwows.com](https://www.powwows.com).

At the annual Viejas Traditional Gathering, the Miss Kumeyaay Nation pageant is part of the event which showcases legacy arts and cultural regalia: bird-singing, dance presentations, foods and games.

Potential candidates must be enrolled members or first-generation descendants of any Kumeyaay/Diegueño band in San Diego County.

"Anyone can enter the pageant if they can prove they are a first-generation descendant of the Kumeyaay Nation," Ms. Redfern said. "Entrants must be between

14 and 22 years old, single, apply by August 5, and enrolled or graduated from high school.”

Contenders are evaluated on poise, cultural knowledge (language, history, songs, stories, etc.), tribal and community involvement, a YouTube video, and a two-page essay, “which I kinda went over because I had a lot to say,” Ms. Sweetgrass said.

Prizes are an honorarium of five hundred dollars for travel expenses, a basket hat, and a sash to keep when the reign is completed.

The current matching beaded crown and sash were created by a selected Native artisan, and a new set is made every five years.

When asked if she made her dress, Ms. Sweetgrass laughed, “I wish I could sew! I’ve tried really hard. Props to everyone who can sew. A family friend made my dress. I chose my colors to represent nature and new beginnings.”

After her reign in 2024, Ms. Sweetgrass’s five-year-old crown and sash will be retired and placed in a museum with the others at Viejas Community Center. The search for a Native American artist is now open to create a new crown and sash.

What is your first official act as Miss Kumeyaay Nation 2023?

“I will hold an event to introduce my reign to the community. My family hosts a dinner, games of Kumeyaay bingo with prizes, bird singing, and dancing on Friday, October 6,” Ms. Sweetgrass said.

Appearances are required at most Kumeyaay-related gatherings and events but are not limited to Kumeyaay only. All Miss Kumeyaay Nation appearances/events must be approved by the committee.

What is Kumeyaay bingo?

“Basically regular bingo but instead of numbers we’re using Kumeyaay words. My mom and I are creating the cards.”

The family unit remains a vital aspect of Indigenous cultures, so naturally, Sycuan Chairman Cody Martinez was on hand to congratulate his cousin when the winner was announced.



Cody Martinez, Chairman of the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, with his cousin Harmony Sweetgrass after being crowned Miss Kumeyaay Nation. (Photo courtesy of Charlene Elliott)

“He told me that he was really proud of me and that everyone is behind me and will help in any way that I need,” Ms. Sweetgrass said.

Moreover, Ms. Sweetgrass is a descendant of Margarita Wypoke (kingsnake) and Augustine Paipa, “the first recorded captain of Sycuan who lived to be 126 years old!” She also has ties to the Baja Kumiai near the borders of the U.S. and Mexico.

What does this title mean to you?

“Winning for me was very personal because there has never been a Miss Kumeyaay Nation from my band, Sycuan. I plan to use my platform to continue to advocate for the empowerment of our women and youth and for the revitalization of our culture, language, and land.

In a sense, we had to be represented in this space, which fueled my passion for running. I wished I had someone like myself to look up to when I was growing up. I had been preparing for a long time because it was so personal to me.”

Please explain why you had no one to look up to?

“I attended Steele Canyon High School. I think the graduating class was 2,000, with maybe five Native Californians. I was bullied. Name-calling and such, but it didn’t go past that. The kids treated us in the stereotypical way of what they thought was an “Indian.” Most kids didn’t know what it meant to have such a big Native community. There wasn’t any representation on campus.

My mom and grandma were my best role models. They are the sole reason I am the woman I am today! My mom is heavily involved in our culture and traditions. She is the director of our cultural center and museum at Sycuan.

My mom, my grandma, and I danced at my event together—three generations!”

What inspired you to finally enter the pageant?

“This was my last year to run before I would no longer meet the age requirement. Part of the reason why I didn’t run the previous years is because I knew how important it was for Sycuan. I wanted to apply with 100 percent certainty and confidence in myself.

I ran for my generation and the generations after me [so that I can] show them they [too] can do anything their heart desires, including becoming a real-life princess. And to emphasize that it’s important to be proud of who they are in every space.”

What does the future look like for you?

“I was originally attending Northern Arizona University, but during COVID-19, I was needed at home. Afterward, I decided Kumeyaay Community College was a better fit, where I would get a degree in American Indian Studies.

I want to continue working with the youth group at Sycuan Cultural Center. And to revitalize my culture and languages by Indigenizing education.”

An affiliate college to Cuyamaca College, Kumeyaay Community College (KCC) primarily serves and relies on resources from the thirteen reservations of the Kumeyaay Nation situated in San Diego County:

San Pasqual, Santa Ysabel, Mesa Grande, Inaja-Cosmit, Captain Grande, Barona, Viejas, Ewiiapaayp, Sycuan, Jamul, Manzanita, La Posta, and Campo, as well as four principle Kumeyaay reservations on the opposite side of the U.S. – Mexican border: Juntas de Neji, San José de la Zorra, San Antonio Necua, and La Huerta.

The Associate in Arts in Kumeyaay Studies is offered through Cuyamaca College at KCC, and is designed to provide an understanding of Kumeyaay history, culture and heritage.

It is a multidisciplinary degree, drawing from the sciences, humanities, world languages and history departments. Through specific coursework that includes on-site learning experiences, students will learn about the Kumeyaay Nation of San Diego’s East County region.

Miss Kumeyaay Nation 2023 represents five generations of this land’s history, including the ground on the other side of California’s geopolitical border.

She earned the title by working hard, volunteering, and walking with respect and purpose on a path worn well by those before her. She is eager to be the change she wants to see in the world. Ms. Sweetgrass wears the crown well.